The Librarian of Basra

A True Story from Iraq

WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED BY
JEANETTE WINTER

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Alia Muhammad Baker is the librarian in Basra, Iraq. For fourteen years, her library has been a meeting place for those who love books. Until now. Now war has come, and Alia fears that the library—along with the thirty thousand books within it—will be destroyed forever.

In a war-stricken country where civilians—especially women—have little power, this true story about a librarian's struggle to save her community's priceless collection of books reminds us all how, throughout the world, the love of literature and the respect for knowledge know no boundaries.

REINFORCED BINDING

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Harcourt Children's Books

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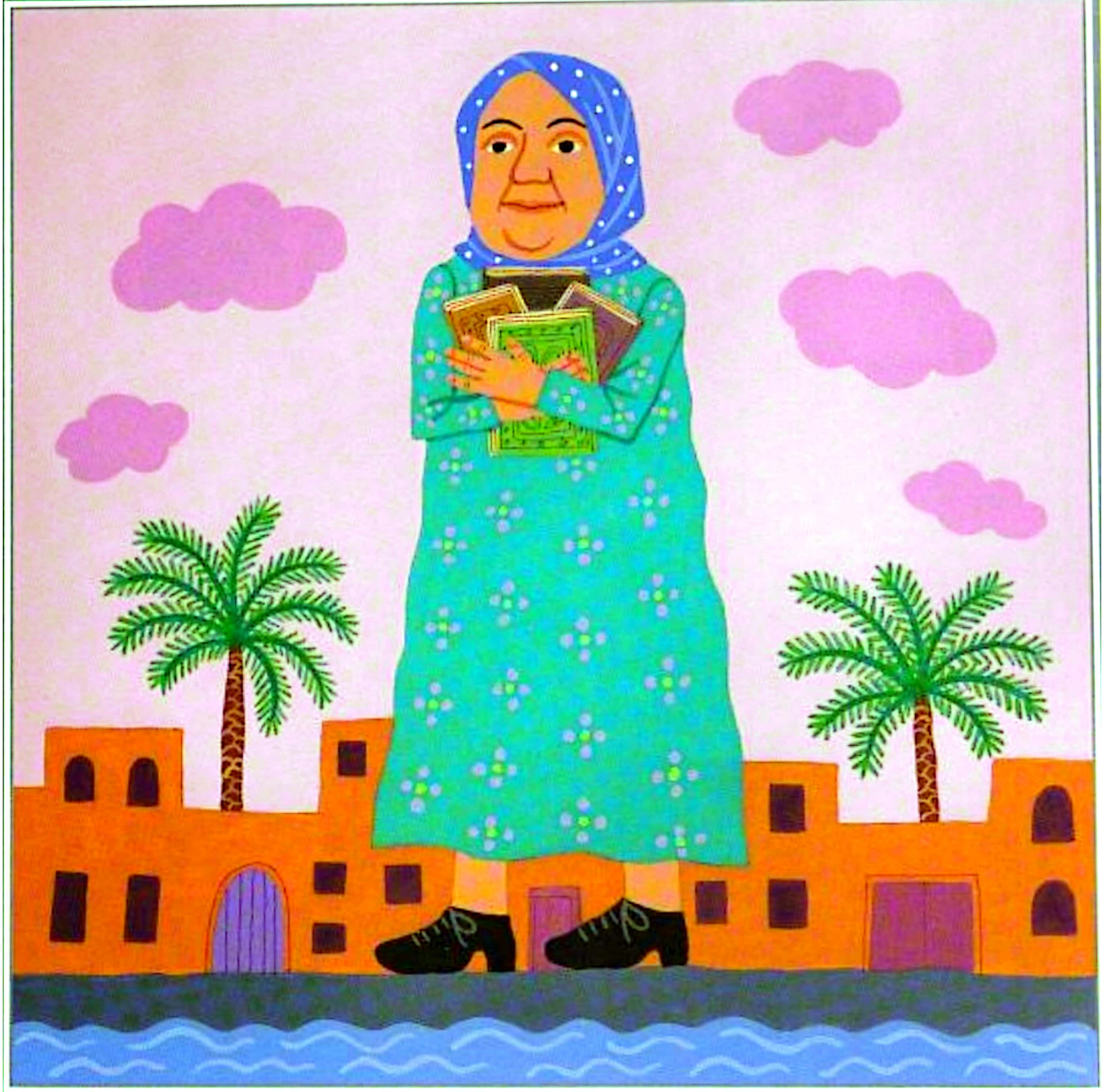
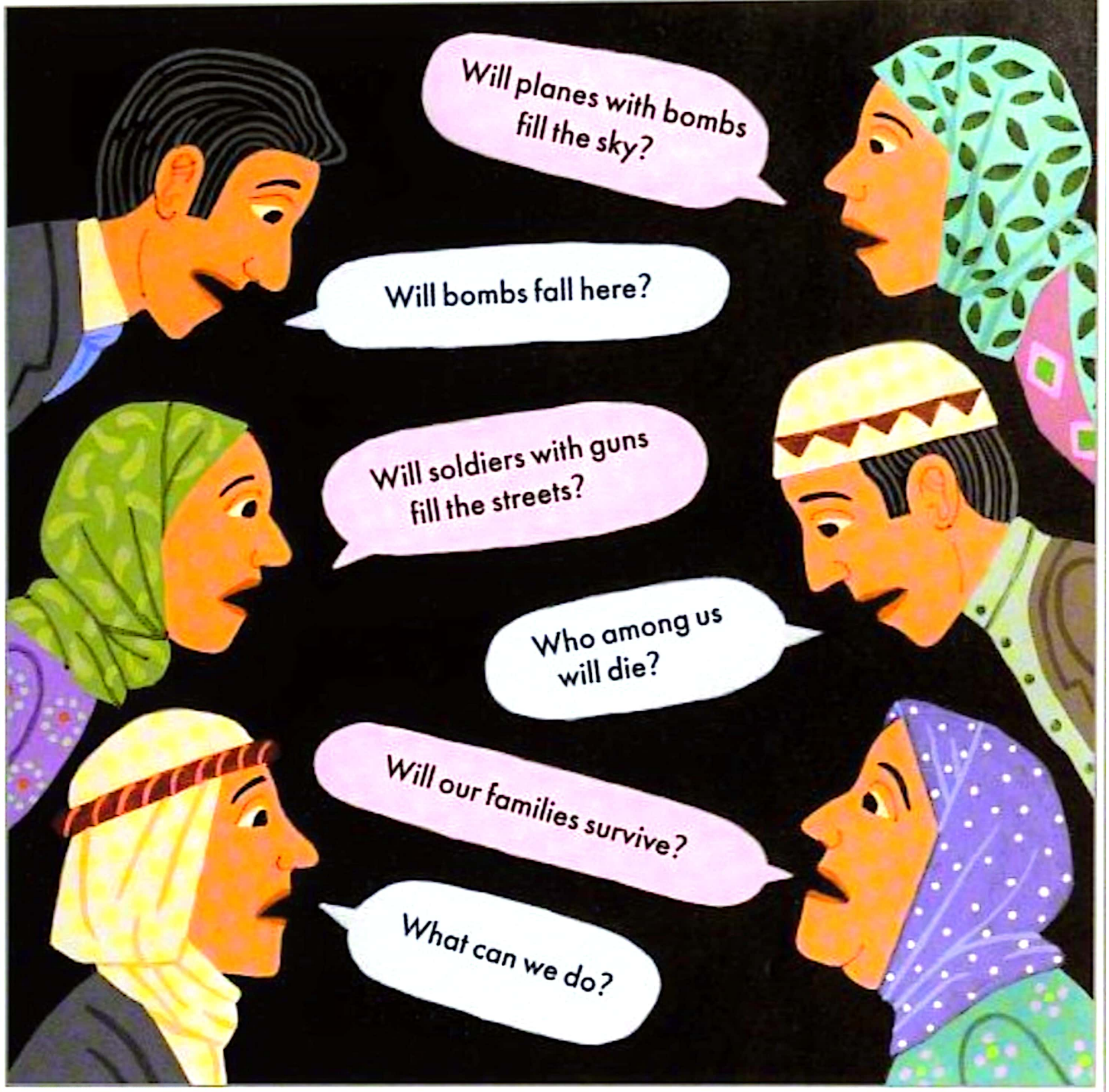
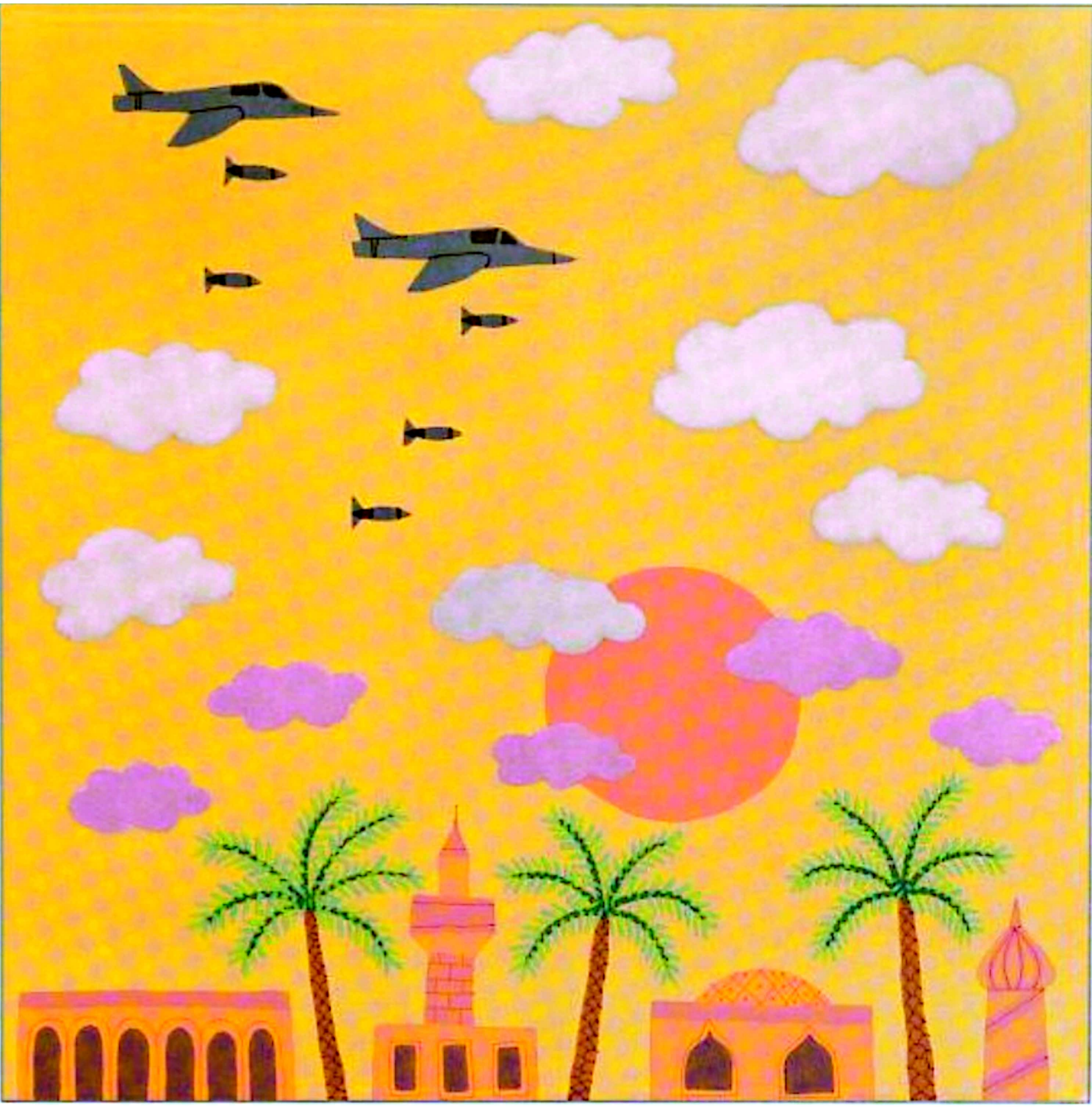



Will planes with bombs fill the sky?
Will bombs fall here?
Will soldiers with guns fill the streets?
Who among us will die?
Will our families survive?
What can we do?

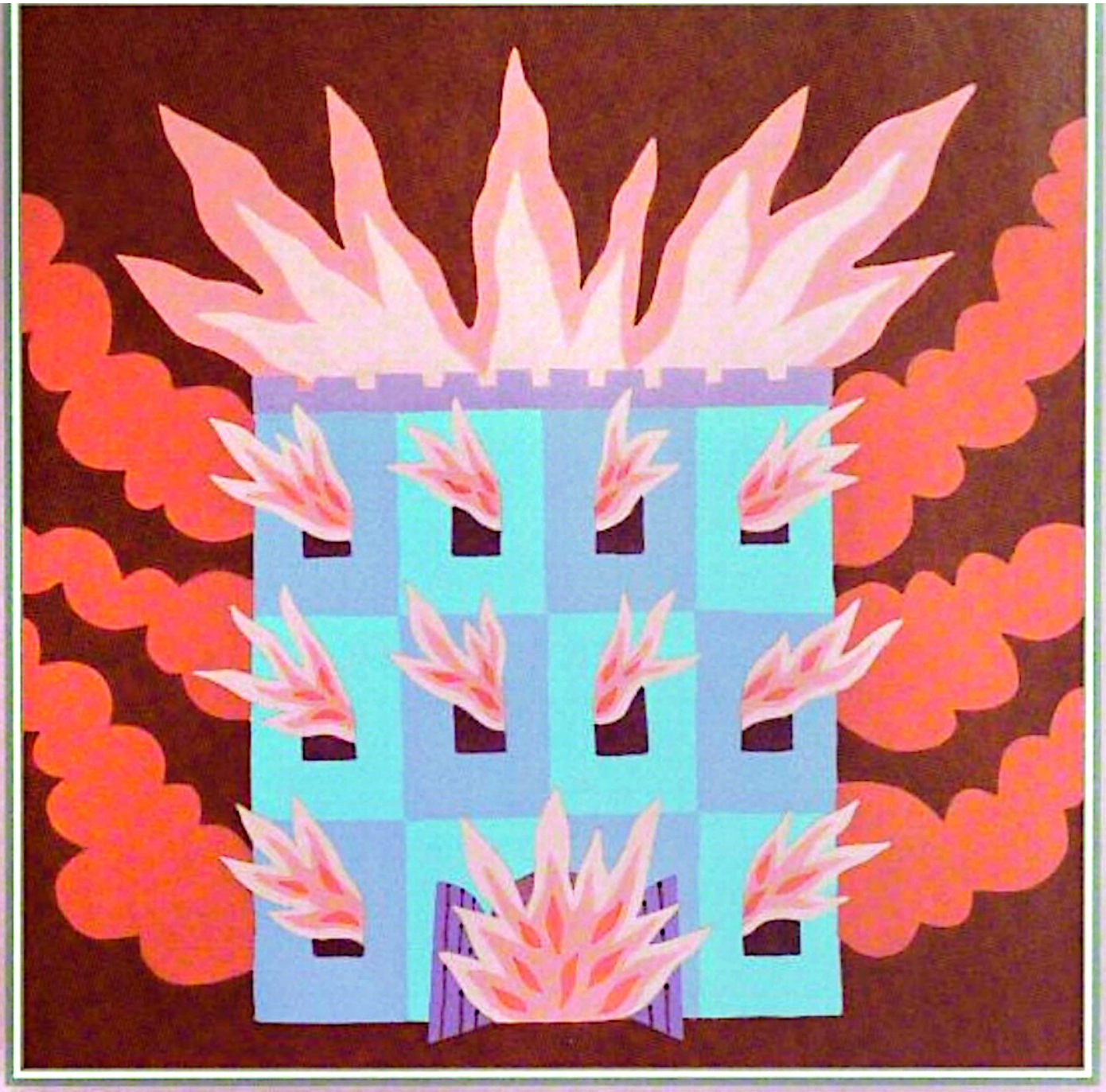
الله أكبر

The whispers of war grow louder.
Government offices are moved into the library.
Soldiers with guns wait on the roof.
Alia waits—and fears the worst.

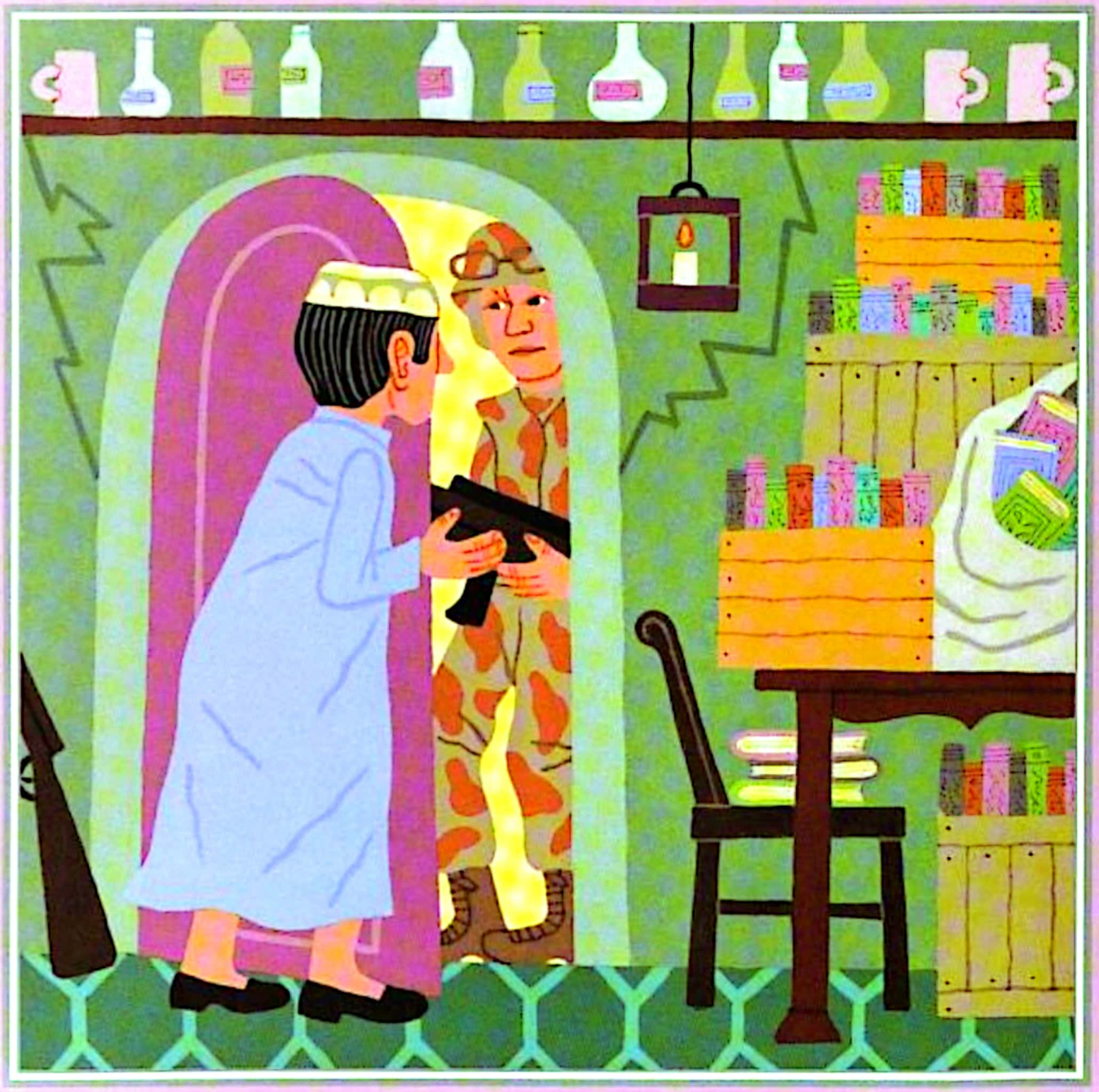


Alia watches as library workers, government workers,
and soldiers abandon the library.
Only Alia is left to protect the books.

The books stay hidden as the war rages on.

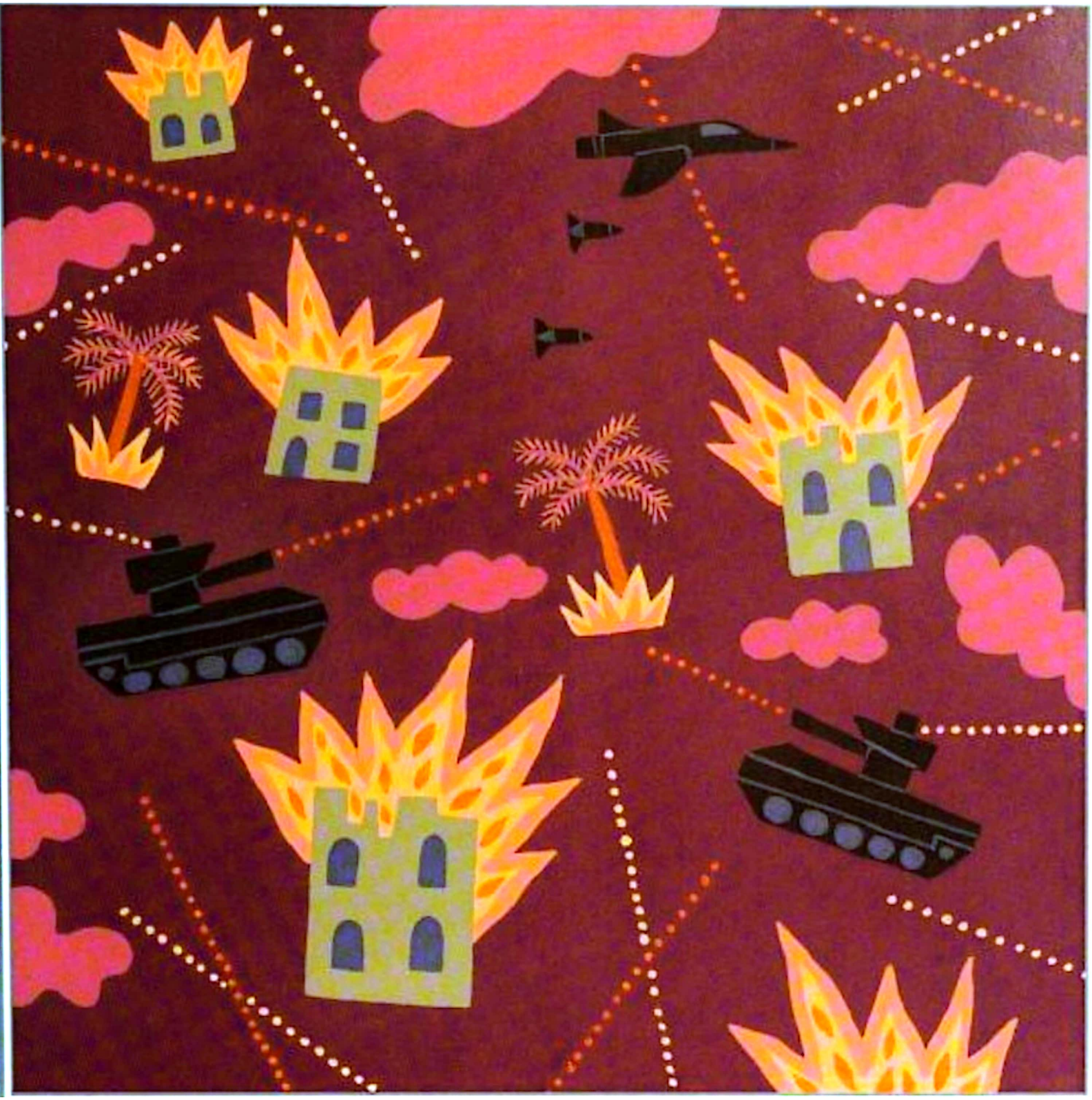


Then, nine days later, a fire burns the library to the ground.



The next day, soldiers come to Anis's restaurant.
"Why do you have a gun?" they ask.
"To protect my business," Anis replies.
The soldiers leave without searching inside.
They do not know that the whole of the library is in my restaurant, thinks Anis.

In Alia's house, books are everywhere,
filling floors and cupboards and windows—



But until then, the books are safe—
safe with the librarian of Basra.

A Note from the Author

The invasion of Iraq reached Basra on April 6, 2003. With the help of friends and neighbors, Alia Muhammad Baker, chief librarian of Basra's Central Library, managed to rescue seventy percent of the library's collection before the library burned nine days later.

These events were first revealed to the world by *New York Times* reporter Shaila K. Dewan, who heard about Alia and the library during a visit to Anis Muhammad's restaurant, the Hamdan—which is near the library and is known as one of the best in Basra. Shaila's translator said Anis had an incredible story to tell about the war, so Shaila made an appointment to talk with him. Alia joined the discussion, and together they went on to share this amazing story.

Soon after the library was destroyed, Alia suffered a stroke and had heart surgery. But she is healing, and despite all, she is determined to see that the library is rebuilt.

For Allyn Johnston

Many thanks to Shaila K. Dewan, who uncovered the story of Alia Muhammad Baker and reported it in the New York Times on July 27, 2003.

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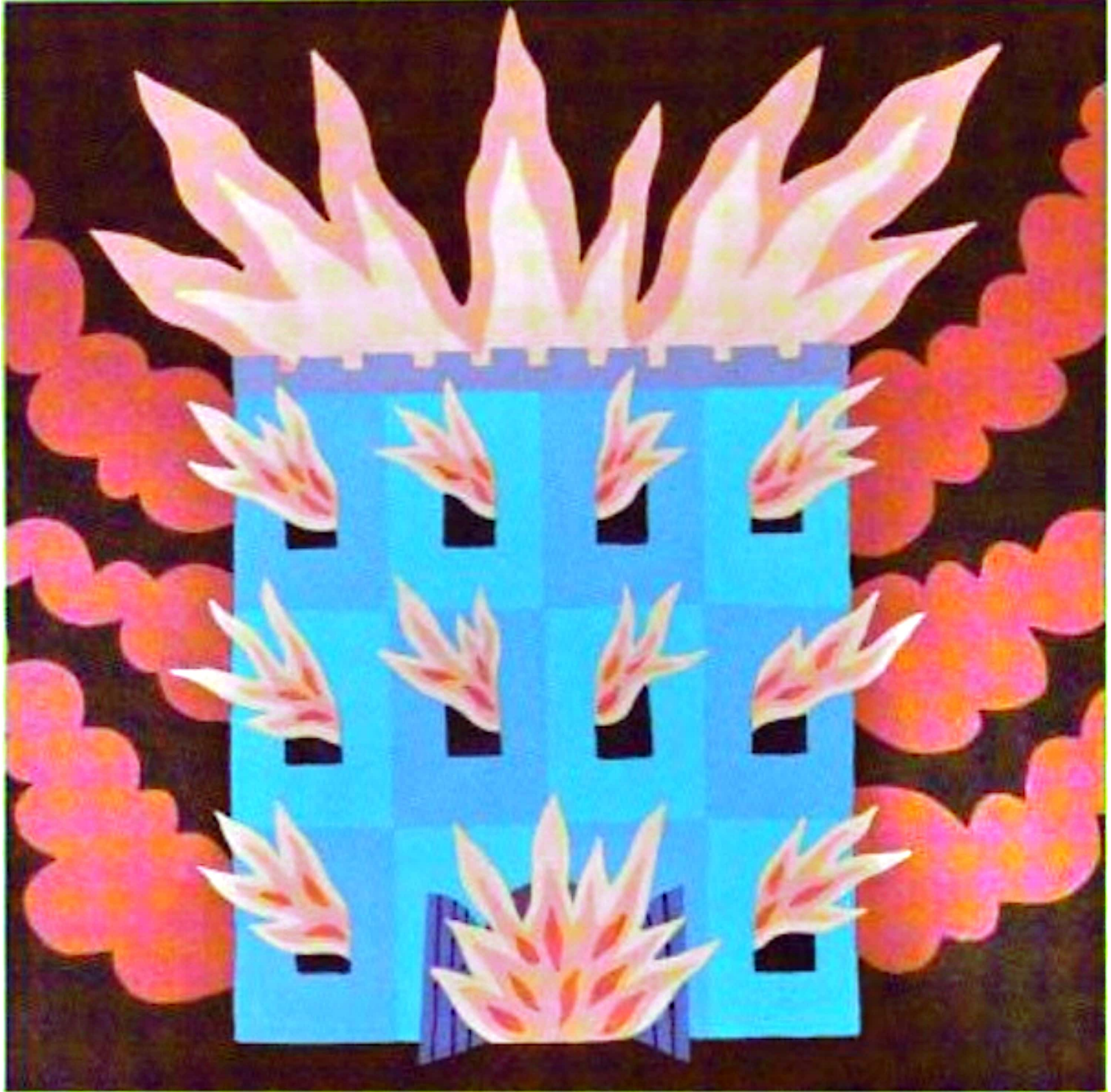
JEANETTE WINTER has written and illustrated many picture books, including *Calavera Abecedario: A Day of the Dead Alphabet Book*, *My Name Is Georgia*, and *Josefina*. She lives in New York City.

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